



A Focus on Education in Central New York

**A Commitment to Educating Students,
Supporting Teachers,
and Growing the Middle Class**

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*U.S. Representative
Dan Maffei*



I believe that Central New York is the best place to live, work, raise a family, and retire. I am committed to ensuring that our region stays that way, but we must have the workforce and talent to help grow the middle class and spur our local economy. One of the keys to a strong middle class is providing our kids with a quality education from Pre-K to high school, a strong college and university system, and local vocational programs that prepare our young people for a lifetime of success.

Over the last two months, I convened an Education Listening Tour across Central New York. Meeting with dozens of local educators, administrators, parents, students, and other leaders in our community, I heard firsthand the challenges facing our education system and the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult to deliver on our commitment to exceptional education across the region. Our children are competing in a 21st Century economy, and it is our responsibility to provide them with the tools they need to succeed.

Many of the challenges facing Central New York's educational system are not unique to the region, but we have the students, educators, and leaders who have the ability to solve our most pressing challenges. By working together and fostering important partnerships, we have the knowledge and dedication to create solutions to our greatest challenges. I am committed to strengthening the middle class and creating an environment where every Central New Yorker has a fair shot.

The information contained in this report is an account of what individuals who participated in the Education Listening Tour events told me and the recommendations derived from what was discussed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dan Maffei". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

U.S. Representative Dan Maffei

Overview

Education is the backbone of a strong economy and a thriving middle class. If we want our kids to find good jobs when they finish school, then we need to give them the best possible education. Both high-quality public education from Pre-K to 12th grade as well as affordable higher education are major incentives for businesses and middle class families looking to move to Central New York. The region is an attractive place for middle class families to work, raise children, and contribute to the local economy because of the quality public education that is available in our communities. Similarly, our quality higher education is an incentive for students to stay in Central New York and contribute to our economy, and it attracts prospering businesses. In order to create more jobs and grow Central New York's economy, we need to keep providing our kids with the best education possible.



Rep. Maffei meets with Le Moyne College students.

Review

Tours and visits to local schools to meet with students and educators:

- Jamesville-Dewitt Middle School
- Frazer School Pre-K Class
- Auburn Junior High School
- Syracuse Academy of Science
- Lincoln Middle School
- Nottingham High School
- Henninger High School
- Tour of SUNY Upstate Medical University
- Onondaga Community College
- Le Moyne College



Rep. Maffei talks to Central New York middle school students about the importance of a high-quality education.

TIMELINE:

January 28th: Tour of SUNY Upstate Medical University

January 31st: Visit to Frazer School Pre-K Class

January 31st: Visit to Syracuse Academy of Science

March 1st: Visit with Le Moyne Students

April 30th: Visit with Students at SUNY – Environmental Science and Forestry

May 29th: Visit to Jamesville-Dewitt Middle School

May 30th: Syracuse Educational Opportunity Center’s 43rd Annual Recognition Ceremony

June 21st: Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County – Summer Learning Day

August 5th: Onondaga / Oswego Education Listening Tour Kick-Off – Rep. Maffei began a listening tour at his alma mater, Nottingham High School, to hear from educators and parents in advance of the upcoming school year. This event focused on pre-K through high school education.

August 13th: Auburn / Wayne Education Roundtable – This roundtable discussion, hosted by Rep. Maffei, focused on some of the most pressing issues in our local school systems. Two of the main topics discussed were investments into early childhood education and how to create a better-quality education experience in New York.

August 22nd: President Obama’s Syracuse Speech on Education – Rep. Maffei joined President Obama, local educators, and other elected officials at Henninger High School. The president’s speech highlighted college affordability and the importance of attaining a college education.

September 6th: Higher Education Roundtable – This roundtable discussion focused on issues around higher education. It brought together stakeholders from across Central New York to discuss the challenges facing students, faculty, and administrators in colleges, universities, and career/technical training institutions.

September 12th: Survey for CNY Educators – Rep. Maffei sent a survey to hundreds of local educators and posted the same survey online seeking input from parents, educators, and interested parties across Central New York. Rep. Maffei asked individuals to identify solutions for the most pressing issues impacting our education system today.

September 16th: “Strengthening the Middle Class” Town Hall – At Onondaga County Community College, Rep. Maffei heard from Central New Yorkers on a wide range of education issues including No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top.



Rep. Maffei visits the Syracuse Academy of Science.

Keys to Success in Education

- I. Providing Support and Reasonable Timelines for Educators
- II. Community Support and Involvement
- III. Investing in Pre-K
- IV. Investments in School Infrastructure to Support Curriculum
- V. Career Track and Vocational Education
- VI. Making Higher Education Affordable

I. PROVIDING SUPPORT AND REASONABLE TIMELINES FOR EDUCATORS

“Teachers need things like professional development, collaborative time with each other, and trust. That needs to be part of the larger agenda. Teachers need support. Part of that support is time. They need time to be able to work with each other and focus on kids. They need to be trusted with their own profession.” – Kevin Ahern, Syracuse Teachers Association President



At each roundtable event, educators repeatedly expressed concern about the increased standardization of public education. Parents are concerned that students are being tested to an excessive level. Teachers welcome accountability, but believe testing students on materials they have not yet been taught is setting educators up for failure. **Whether it was teacher evaluation, Race to the Top, or Common Core standards, nearly every participant agreed that they were not given the tools and preparation they need to succeed.**

I believe we need to create standards and assess the quality of education we provide our children; however we cannot simply measure the outputs of our system. We need to take a close look at what challenges teachers and students face in reaching the goals set before them. Not all students begin at the same starting point, so we cannot simply measure whether or not a child met a goal set by an outside force. We need to take into account how far that student has come. Many students struggle with language barriers, learning disabilities; or family challenges at home that make it nearly impossible to match the achievements of students who do not face such obstacles. I know that not every child learns the same way and no classroom is the same as the next. A one-size fits all approach to teaching is not effective for our children.

One of the most troubling realities to surface during each roundtable was the low morale of educators. In an effort to increase accountability, teachers have been left feeling targeted and

lacking the flexibility to adequately educate their students. The timing of increased teacher evaluation with efforts such as Common Core has inextricably linked the two initiatives, resulting in a lack of buy-in from those responsible for implementation.

I am committed to a re-examination of these programs and the timelines for execution. While there is some value in standardization, multiple poorly-timed efforts have severely damaged the confidence and ardency of many local teachers, driving some out of the field and discouraging future generations from entering the education profession.

II. COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND INVOLVEMENT

“I’m always struck, in particular in our region, with the great diversity of colleges and universities that exist and our ability to be good colleagues. I think it’s important for us to work harder and to work with your support on creating pathways for educational success for the full range of students which might mean sharing more and collaborating in more strategic ways, rather than competing.” – Lisa Marsh Ryerson, Former President of Wells College



Traditionally schools received support from parents, the business community, elected leaders, and other interest groups fostering collaboration and making communities stronger. For our children to succeed, we need to redouble efforts and ensure that we are pursuing a community based approach, seeking input and best practices across communities.

Traditional education models do not serve the same purpose and provide the same educational outcomes as they did 10 or 20 years ago. At the same time, we need partners more than ever from the business community, elected leaders, and interested parties to help create a pathway forward for our young people. **Partnerships with businesses and others can help shape our educational programs and provide opportunities for children looking to pursue jobs across numerous professional fields.**

Students have a better chance of succeeding when they understand what they are learning and why they are learning. The value of education is often only realized when given in context of a practical application around its impact in the real world. We should foster environments where young people can partner with today’s leaders to better understand what is at stake for their education.

III. INVESTING IN PRE-K

“I think that we need to look at the many research studies that have shown that a focus on early childhood will give a child a strong start in the areas of literacy, numeracy, and the experiences in developing social skills. Early childhood programs also provide a context for a child developing and understanding the world in which they live and learn in those earliest years.” – Dr. Donna DeSiato, East Syracuse Minoa Central School District Superintendent



A child’s education now begins before Kindergarten. While traditional educational models started children at 5 or 6 years old for half or full day Kindergarten, leading researchers and advocates have determined that Pre-K programs significantly improve educational outcomes.

Research shows that students in communities that invest in Pre-K programs and offer kids the opportunity to attend school early have a better chance for life success. Evidence also shows that young people who attend Pre-K are more prepared for traditional elementary school learning and working with peers. In fact, a *Center for Public Education* study determined that participation in Pre-K programs positioned kids to be better students over other factors including demographics, family income levels, or background.

It is clear from conversations with educators and other leaders in the community that early childhood education and Pre-K are priorities for Central New York. Moreover, some communities and school districts have already made investments in these programs, but there is more work to be done. While some school districts would like to invest resources for Pre-K programs, they struggle to find the funding to make it a reality. We have to get serious about early childhood education and make investing in these critical programs a priority. Our children deserve a real chance for life success, and our community needs the best and brightest to compete.

Our budget concerns are real. We need to do all that we can to address the debt, but we need to do so in a responsible manner that continues to promote long-term economic growth and job creation and doesn’t hurt our children’s chances of success in the long term.

Local school districts depend on important funds for programs like Head Start and Pre-K, and I firmly believe in continuing access to those funds. Sequestration implemented cuts to Head Start and Early Head Start, which will be cut by over \$400 million. As a result, more than 70,000 children nationwide will lose access and 14,000 Head Start personnel could lose their jobs. I believe these cuts are misguided and are wrong for Central New York children and families. Investing in education and making sure the United States has the best-prepared students in the world is a key way to grow our economy and the middle class.

IV. INVESTMENTS IN SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT CURRICULUM

“To me, it’s a fairness issue – the haves and the have-nots. Some families can afford high-speed internet and some can’t. The kids that do not have access to that capability – it’s really a shame. And it should be readily available, no matter how much you make.” – David Sholes, Red Creek Central School District Superintendent



In a globalized world and new economy that calls for training in technical fields, I believe that we should work together to make important investments in school infrastructure that supports curriculum like Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). By supporting innovative math and science programs for students at the middle school and high school level, we can inspire an interest in these critical fields.

STEM fields generally require access to technology that may be out of reach for some school districts. Technology is changing at a rapid pace and we need to make sure our children do not get left behind. Our students must have access to cutting-edge advancements in order to maintain relevant skills. Resources such as computers, tablets and broadband Internet access - at one time considered luxuries - have now become necessities. Unfortunately, during my roundtable discussions, many participants spoke to the digital divide. Classrooms remain untouched by technology for years. Outdated infrastructure and equipment make it a struggle to keep up with the demands of students and teachers. Students in many areas are forced to use dial-up Internet connections, unable to access websites for news, research, communication, etc.

For our students to succeed, we must invest in technology. We have to develop innovative ways to make these resources available and affordable to our local school districts. We must invest in infrastructure to expand high-speed Internet access to rural areas. Failure to provide this basic need to our children is a tremendous set back.

I am committed to discovering new methods, whether through trade-in programs, tax incentives or major infrastructure projects, to make certain our students can succeed and remain on an equal playing field with their peers.

Our education system needs to prepare our kids to compete in the global economy. A STEM education can be applied to the fastest growing sectors of the workforce and help middle class families provide for the future. In recent years, we have seen historic numbers of high school graduates pursuing science and engineering degrees, with more than half a million students enrolled in 2010. We need to continue this progress by fully supporting STEM and the infrastructure investments needed to support this curriculum at the high school level.

V. CAREER TRACK AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

“I see a shift in education from the traditional ‘I’m coming after high school and I’m going to get my four-year degree.’ Unfortunately, we’re locked in an old mechanism of evaluating success that hasn’t caught up with reality.” – Eric Zizza, Cayuga Community College



Vocational programs offer a tremendous opportunity for students to excel through a pathway often overlooked in the face of mounting pressure to attend a college or university. During our roundtable discussions, I heard from some parents that their children seemed disinterested in the traditional classroom setting, yet were enthusiastic about the hands-on opportunities provided by programs with a focus on occupation.

Some school districts in Central New York are struggling with drop-out rates that are hovering around fifty percent. **Many students no longer see a value in traditional four year higher education, and we must meet them where they are. Vocational programs can serve as that meeting point.** Career and technical education programs offer a hands-on approach to learning that focuses on the skills and knowledge graduates need to compete. These programs often collaborate with industry and businesses to develop courses and training tailored to a particular field. Making smart investments in vocational education also helps prepare future generations of workers to compete for domestic manufacturing jobs that we are working hard to keep and create in the United States.

Now more than ever, these centers that focus on occupational skills need additional support, both in terms of funding and visibility. As a student at Nottingham High School, I benefited from these types of programs and I am committed to their continued success.

VI. MAKING HIGHER EDUCATION AFFORDABLE

“As a student coming out of college with all that debt, my main focus is to get rid of this student debt. I can’t go into a job that has the most benefit for the people around me – I have to go into a job that has the most benefit for me to get rid of these loans. If we’re not taking care of our students first, how can they take care of us?” – Duane Ford, Vice President of Syracuse Student Government



Central New York is home to some of the best colleges and universities in the nation. Our two and four year institutions receive accolades and national recognition and we have so much to be proud of the environment they have fostered in communities across the region.

Unfortunately, higher education is not a reality for enough of our high school students. The net cost of college has risen about six percent a year after inflation over the last ten years, and recent reports suggest that tuition will continue to rise. While we have made strides locally and our colleges and universities in the area have made keeping costs low a priority, rising tuition makes it very challenging for many of our potential students.

Our district's community colleges provide a more affordable alternative for the first two years of college. These institutions have become a vital resource for students in Central New York. Students enrolled in community colleges have the option to continue their education at a four year college or university, or to move directly into the workforce. Community colleges provide specialized courses, as well as access to local industry professionals that can be very helpful for students.

Student loans are also an important resource for students, and I was proud to support measures in Congress to ensure that these rates did not double earlier this year. That said, we must be vigilant when it comes to supporting our young people who would like to attend a two or four year university. For too long, Central New York students have been graduating from college with student loan debt that is equivalent to a mortgage, but they have no house. We need to make it more affordable for Central New York's middle class to be able to send their children to college and have the skills necessary to compete in today's global economy.

Recommendations

I. Providing Support and Reasonable Timelines for Educators

Professional Development: Teachers must be provided an adequate timeframe to meet current standards and incorporate the emerging criteria into their classroom. The timeline from implementation needs to be re-examined and lengthened so that additional time can be afforded to teaching professionals to ensure the guidelines placed upon them are realistic and logical. In Congress, I support stronger professional development measures in the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind to ensure that teachers have access to the resources they need.



Rep. Maffei hosts the Onondaga/Oswego Education Roundtable at Nottingham High School.

Teacher Recognition: In recent months, teachers have been unfairly blamed as the “problem” with our educational system. These accusations not only oversimplify the issue, but also ignore the complex issues of poverty, crime and economic hardships that have plagued our public education system. It is clear that there have been many issues with the rollout of the new Common Core curriculum standards across New York, and teachers need to be given extra time and support in the transition to these new, nationwide standards. These new standards were implemented before many teachers received proper training and professional development. The New York State Education Department should work to immediately address these concerns, work to engage and educate parents about these new standards, and provide the tools teachers need to help their students be successful.

II. Investing in Pre-K

Expanding Access: By investing in Pre-Kindergarten programs, we place our children on a track for future success. Unfortunately, this opportunity is not accessible to all children in Central New York. For example, in Onondaga County, only seven out of 18 school districts offer Pre-K programs. We must put services in place where they are lacking, and we have to expand access to more kids. We need to give our children a strong start and put them on the pathway to academic excellence. In Congress, I am a cosponsor of the Providing Resources Early for Kids Act (PRE-K Act). This important bill would create a new federal-state partnership to improve preschool programs and expand programs to serve more children.

III. Investments in School Infrastructure

School Infrastructure Grants: In order to continue moving forward and remain competitive in a global economy, students need the right tools. Unfortunately for many of our communities, students do not have access to resources that have become standard in many areas, such as high-speed Internet. We need to take advantage of the federal grant opportunities available to our community and invest in the infrastructure our students need to stay ahead and succeed. That is why I will be announcing a series of grant workshops to help connect communities to grants that can assist them in upgrading their telecommunications to ensure that all students have access to the information and learning opportunities they need to succeed.

Public-Private Partnerships: Most schools around the region and across the country were built to serve the Baby Boomer generation. Experts estimate that it would take at least \$270 billion to modernize and maintain our nation’s schools that are in need. There are many existing tax credits intended to spur renovation of existing buildings, though most are not available for use with schools. We should examine the programs that work and extend the same opportunities for private investment in public schools where local districts lack the means to renovate and modernize the schools themselves.

IV. Career Track and Vocational Education

Bonus Tax Break for Employer-Sponsored Training: Many employers want to expand the skills of their employees and train new employees and recent high school graduates, but do not have the resources to do so. We need to reward employers that invest in training and accreditations for their workers by allowing them to deduct some of the cost of the training they provide for their workers to ensure that businesses are able to train and retain skilled workers here in Central New York.

Create the Central New York Technical Achievement Award: Many students in our region pursue success through a path that may not include college. We need to encourage and acknowledge these young people, and congratulate them on their achievement in vocational, career and technical training. The Central New York Technical Achievement Award would recognize those graduating high school seniors who are pursuing careers in technical and career studies. These students can serve as an example to future young people that a four-year college degree is not a pre-requisite for a successful and fulfilling career.

V. Making Higher Education Affordable

Reauthorize the Higher Education Act: In August, President Obama visited Syracuse to announce his proposals to make college more affordable. Parts of his plan can be implemented by the president alone, but many other parts require Congress to act. The Higher Education Act authorizes important education programs, including Pell Grants, the Federal-Work Study program, Perkins Loans, and the TRIO programs. One reform would link federal student aid to college performance to incentivize colleges to reduce costs and increase quality for students. Another would make all federal student loan borrowers eligible for “Pay as You Earn,” a program that allows recent graduates to cap their federal student loan payments at ten percent of their monthly income, guaranteeing the payments will be affordable. The Higher Education Act was last reauthorized in 2008 and Congress should work next year to enact these and other reforms to make college more affordable for students and their families.

Conclusion

When we invest in education, we are building a stronger middle class. Succeeding in today’s world means having the right knowledge and skills to compete and thrive. I believe it is possible to work together with all stakeholders, teachers, administrators, elected officials, and students to find workable solutions for our community’s education system. The region continues to be an attractive place for middle class families to work, raise children, and contribute to the local economy because of the quality public education that is available in our communities across Central New York. I am committed to ensuring our kids have access to quality education from Pre-K – high school, a strong college and university system, and local vocational programs that prepare our young people to compete in the 21st Century economy. Together, we can work to strengthen the middle class and give everyone a fair shot at the American Dream.